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Guard Troops May Face Early Return To Iraq

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(CBS/AP) Some National Guard units that had been deployed to Iraq will be redeployed sooner than expected, due to a shift in Pentagon plans to accommodate President Bush's troop buildup, The New York Times is reporting.

Approximately 14,000 National Guard troops who were not scheduled to go back to Iraq before 2009 or 2010 will be redeployed next year. The troops hail from Arkansas, Indiana, Oklahoma and Ohio.

The Pentagon last month abandoned its limit on the time a citizen-soldier can be required to serve on active duty. It did so one day after President Bush announced he would send an additional 21,000 troops to Iraq.

Members of the Guard combat brigades that have served in Iraq in recent years spent 18 months on active duty — about six months in pre-deployment training in the United States, followed by about 12 months in Iraq. Under the old policy, they could not be sent back to Iraq because their cumulative time on active duty would exceed 24 months. Now that cumulative limit has been lifted, giving the Pentagon more flexibility.

However, no final decisions have been made, Guard officials told the Times.

Maj. Chris Heathscott of the Arkansas National Guard said there are too many variables to consider when any mobilization would occur. "All we know at this point is we are preparing for the potential of mobilization," Heathscott said.

The 3,400 members of the Arkansas Guard's 39th Infantry Brigade were mobilized for 18 months, a year of which was spent in Iraq, mainly in 2004. Some members of the unit also were deployed to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and later to support U.S. border patrols.

Heathscott says the brigade would need to build up its supplies in advance of a deployment; at the moment, it is short 600 rifles. But he says the Army's top priority is to supply soldiers already on the ground, followed by those on the verge of deployment. Because it does not have a mobilization order, he says the 39th is farther down on the list.

Heathscott told the Times that an area of major concern is re-enlistment levels over the next year, during which the 39th will face contract expirations and the eligibility of retirement for approximately one-third of its reservists. News that Arkansas reservists will be returned to Iraq may affect retainment.

The top officer in the Iowa National Guard, which is so far not affected by the change in redeployment schedules, acknowledged Tuesday that the demand for citizen-soldiers and airmen will continue because of the heavy reliance on Guard and Reserve forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"They can't go to war without us," said Maj. Gen. Ron Darais, adjutant general of the Iowa National Guard, during a speech to the Iowa Legislature.

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